



**Frank Comments on the Impact of African Americans in Politics
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I was very pleased when the editor asked me to give my views of the impact of African Americans in politics, because my service in the U.S. House of Representatives has given me a very good vantage point from which to observe this.

I know it is fashionable to think poorly of some political institutions, Congress among them, but there is one significant virtue possessed by at least a part of Congress that is too rarely noticed: the Democratic Caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives is one of the few genuinely integrated institutions in the United States. We are making progress in overcoming prejudice of various sorts in many parts of our country, but in few places have we succeeded as markedly as with the 233 Democratic Members of the U.S. House. Because of the diversity of the Democratic voters in this country, we have among those 233 Democrats a large number of people from groups that are still too often excluded from positions of influence. Race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are simply no barriers within the Democratic organization in the House from positions of leadership. We stick very strictly to a system in which people are advanced into leadership positions by their seniority, unless they have proven to be abusive or incompetent, and even in those positions to which people are elected by the entire Membership without regard to seniority, we have achieved the goal of judging people on their merits and not on their particular personal characteristics. This is exemplified by our Speaker, Nancy Pelosi; our second ranking Majority Leader, Steny Hoyer, who is a man of Norwegian descent; and by our third ranking official, the Majority Whip, Jim Clyburn, who was a leader in overcoming the obstacles to participation in South Carolina politics on the part of African Americans.

At the committee level, the chairs of the committees similarly reflect all of these backgrounds. In fact, some of the right-wing opponents of the Democrats tried to use this as a means of building opposition to a Democratic majority in the House by seeking to persuade people not to vote for Democratic candidates for U.S. Representative in 2006 lest the "wrong people" get into power. One ad from some right-wing groups that many of us saw urged people not to vote for a Democrat for House of Representatives because if the Democrats took the majority, the committee chairs would be Charlie Rangel, an African American who chairs the tax writing committee, Ways and Means; John Conyers, an African American from Detroit who chairs the important Judiciary Committee; and myself as Chair of the Financial Services Committee. When someone reported to Congressman Rangel that people had been warning not to vote Democratic lest the chairmen of the important committees be Rangel, Conyers and me, he replied, "Gee, I didn't know Barney Frank was colored."

I have had a particularly good chance to observe the importance of African American participation in national policy-making because the committee of which I am the

Chairman, Financial Services, has jurisdiction over urban issues, and that means that a number of African Americans who represent cities have sought membership on the committee. One of my closest collaborators is Congresswoman Maxine Waters of Los Angeles, who chairs the Housing Subcommittee and has a great deal of influence over the programs that affect New Bedford and other cities. Another of the subcommittee chairs is Mel Watt of North Carolina, an African American who is one of the best lawyers in the House and serves as Chair of our Oversight Committee. From this position, he is a leader in fighting discrimination in financial services.

The impact of my African American colleagues is two-fold. First, they insure that we do not ignore the continuing need to deal with the legacy of racial division that has plagued America for the more than three hundred years in which Europeans have been on this continent. It is easy for people not members of a group to overlook the impact that particular policies may have on that group's chance at a good quality of life. The best example of this in our committee's jurisdiction is the subprime crisis. Obviously people of all races, ages and genders have been negatively affected by the subprime loans, and many people have been victimized by being misled into taking out loans that should not have been granted. But the presence of people like Congressman Watt and Congresswoman Waters insures that we pay particular attention to the fact that, according to undisputed data collected under the Federal Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to be pushed into subprime mortgages with abusive terms than white people who have similar economic circumstances. So we are able to fight against the subprime crisis in general, but also focus our attention on trying to diminish this racial component. (Of course one need not be a member of a particular minority group that is suffering discrimination to be angry about that discrimination and to be determined to fight against it: the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act to which I referred, which has been the source of this good information, was in fact enacted into law in the late eighties primarily because of the determination of my former colleague, Congressman Joe Kennedy.)

African Americans have also been in the forefront of insuring that America pays attention to the important interests we have in the continent of Africa. For too long we have neglected this as a country, and it is now clear to us that there are negative consequences for the entire world if that were to be allowed to continue. In fact, on March 30th, I will lead a delegation of Members of the committee I chair to Africa, beginning with a two-day visit to Cape Verde, so we can focus on American efforts to combat the ills in Africa which, if unchecked, lead to greater problems in the world and African American Members will be prominent among those who will be on that trip and pressing for appropriate American responses.

Finally, having prominent African Americans in leadership positions, like those I mentioned and many others, helps us combat the racial stereotyping that still plagues our country. When Congressman Rangel takes the lead in passing the stimulus package he does not do so as an African American, but rather as one of the most respected Members of Congress. However, the fact that he is African American and is a member of a group against which prejudice has long existed is a very important means of dispelling that prejudice. We've had an example of that here in New Bedford. One of the first requests that newly-elected Mayor Scott Lang made of me in his ongoing determination to combat the problems that beset the city was to ask one of the great heroes of my generation, Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta, to come to New Bedford and meet with young people. John Lewis was a hero in the

sixties by his extraordinarily courageous and principled opposition to racism, in the course of which he was badly beaten several times. John Lewis' visit to New Bedford had, I believe, the effect that Mayor Lang correctly predicted, and this was an example of a man who had been a civil rights leader and is now a very important Member of the U.S. House of Representatives helping us combat the ignorance that we continue to confront.

People who want fully to appreciate the impact of the things I am talking about will, I hope, have a chance to come to Washington – I'll be glad to provide the necessary information – and sit in the Gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives, one flight of stairs above the House Chamber. Those who can do that and look down on the Members of the House at work will see what I am talking about: particularly on the Democratic side, a group of women, men, whites, blacks, Hispanics – and a couple of us who are openly gay – interacting without prejudice, without interposing any artificial tests on each other, but instead cooperating for what we think are the best interests of the country. I know that people don't automatically think of Congress when they seek good examples for young people, but in this particular way, in substantial part because of the leadership roles so many African Americans have played so ably, Congress is not a bad place to emulate.